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SUBJECT: MAYSAN ISCI HEAD: IRAN'S NOT SO BAD

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Dan Foote for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(U) This is a PRT Maysan reporting cable.

¶1. (S/REL MCFI) Summary: Local ISCI head and PC member Sayyid Hashim al-Shauki called the Maysani provincial government "ineffective" in an August 21 meeting with U.S. officials, blaming in part militant pressure on Sadrists politicians. He identified provincial elections as the sole means of improving government performance. Hashim warned that the U.S. is still seen as an occupying force and urged the PRT to concentrate on large-scale projects such as electricity generation. He acknowledged ISCI's Iranian ties but portrayed the relationship as one borne of pragmatism and emphasized ISCI's independence and Iraqi identity. Hashim said Iran was responsible for only a portion of violence within Iraq and blamed Gulf Arab states for supporting Sunni militants. Moqtada al-Sadr "is in a crisis," according to Hashim, and ISCI hopes to work with moderates in the movement to influence his thinking. In a separate August 21 meeting Zaid al-Hoshi, the province's Director of Development and Reconstruction and a close aide to Maysan's governor, blamed Special Groups for the August 19 IDF attack against U.S. forces in Maysan and described growing public frustration over the central government's refusal to adequately fund reconstruction efforts. End Summary.

Provincial Government Ineffective

¶2. (S/REL MCFI) Hashim, meeting with the PRT on August 21 at Camp Garry Owen in Maysan, identified himself as the local ISCI head, a PC member and the chair of the Religious Affairs Committee. "Abu Firas," identified as the head of ISCI's local media outreach office, also attended the meeting. Hashim called the current provincial government "ineffective," citing a divisive PC unable to reach consensus, the pressure of militias, and continuing uncertainty over its relationship to the central government. He also blamed the poor security situation for past inaction, saying "any government feels pressure to provide services, but how could we do so when we are afraid to leave our homes?" Hashim acknowledged that the Sadrists wing of the provincial government previously supported militias, but added that the central government also lent support to militant groups during the tenure of Ibrahim Ja'afari. Referring to the local Sadrists, Hashim said "they can't work with us, and they can't work with you," explaining that Sadrists who wanted to cooperate with the U.S., including the PC Chair, feared a backlash from militants within their movement.

¶3. (S/REL MCFI) Provincial elections, Hashim concluded, were the sole means to improve government effectiveness. Asked about the likely outcome of the elections, Hashim said "anyone with ties to militias doesn't have a chance" and predicted significant gains for ISCI and Da'wa. He praised the newly-formed Tribal Support Council as a "good project," but acknowledged some disgruntlement among the "over 400 tribes" in Maysan and said a request had been submitted to Prime Minister Maliki to revise the composition of the

council. Hashim identified key local leaders as Latif Abud (Da'wa, also head of the Security Committee); Mohammed Wahid (Sadr); Ali Qadim (Fadhlilah); and Mahdi Amran (Socialist).

U.S. seen as occupiers

¶4. (S/REL MCFI) Hashim warned that many Iraqis continue to see the U.S. as an occupying force. A main reason, he explained, is that people do not see any tangible impact from U.S. reconstruction efforts, and he urged the U.S. to concentrate on improving the electricity situation in Maysan.

Abu Firas emphasized the importance of electricity, complaining that Maysanis receive power, on average, fifty percent of the time. Another reason for the poor U.S. reputation, said Hashim, is an "imported" idea that compares the U.S. to Israel and the U.S. presence in Iraq to the threat globalization poses to Muslim culture. To improve the PRT's reputation in the province, he recommended that team members visit the PC, coordinate their efforts with government and tribal leaders, and ensure that all Coalition Forces present in the governorate respect Iraqi norms and culture.

Relationship to Iran

¶5. (S/REL MCFI) Hashim went to pains to portray ISCI's relationship with Iran in a positive light, insisting that ISCI sought to stake out a pragmatic middle ground between Iran and the U.S. "If Iran comes with a powerplant, we say

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'welcome.' If the U.S. brings a hospital, we say 'welcome.' But if either tries to destroy our country, then we will resist them!" he added. Hashim repeatedly denied that ISCI is beholden to Iranian interests, explaining that while Iran was an important source of theological influence, ISCI was an independent Iraqi organization with its own agenda and strategy. "I have a picture of Ayatollah Khomenei in my home," Hashim said, "but that is because he is a religious leader. If a Catholic has a picture of the pope in his house, does that mean that he follows Italian policy?" He added that since the fall of Saddam "not a single Iranian official has visited us, even though our office is the closest to the border."

¶6. (S/REL MCFI) "Unfortunately, everyone focuses on Iran," responded Hashim when asked about Iranian support to militants. "But Iran is only a part of it; many countries want the democratic experiment in Iraq to fail." He blamed the Gulf Arab states for supporting Ba'athist cells in Iraq due to fear of a Shi'a government, and portrayed Iraqi militants as part of a global movement, responsible for attacks from Algeria to Pakistan, that "has no political goal, they live only for bloodshed." In contrast, "ISCI and Badr were in opposition for years, but we prohibited attacks on civilians. Sistani told us, 'if you cannot strike at Saddam without shedding innocent blood, then do not strike."

Muqtada al-Sadr

¶7. (S/REL MCFI) "Muqtada is a part of Iraq," said Hashim, "and right now he is in a crisis. Many people speak about a 'war' between ISCI and Sadr, but that is incorrect; it is a war between the government and those outside of the law." He said ISCI hoped to work with moderates in the Sadr Trend to influence Sadr's thinking. "We want the same thing; we want the Americans to leave. The Americans aren't going to take our oil, but we can sell it to them." He said the main obstacle was the continuing influence of militants within Sadr's inner circle. Hashim shrugged off the question as to whether Sadr is a 'hojt al-Islam,' saying "that is a matter for the hawza, but the true authority comes from the

practice, not from the degree" (Note: In several recent statements Sadr referred to himself using this honorific, meaning 'Authority of Islam,' the highest clerical rank below ayatollah. End Note.)

Governor's Aide

¶ 8. (S/REL MCFI) Zaid denied any JAM culpability in the August 19 IDF attack on U.S. forces in Maysan, insisting that the Iraqi Army had concluded the perpetrators came from "outside the province" and that Special Groups were responsible for the attack. "People are starting to feel better and enjoying their freedom," he explained, "and this makes the terrorists angry. Even former members of JAM are starting to talk about a new reality, with a new perception of the government and the ISF." He insisted that "many factors," including government pressure and the desire of Muqtada, had forced JAM to change its behavior. He said a lack of central government support had left the provincial government "in a bad position," blaming reconstruction minister Haq al-Haqi for repeatedly failing through on publicized commitments for projects. Zaid said that residents continued to attack oil pipelines during recent security operations because "Many people see the central government as a thief that takes our oil without giving us any back." He warned that "if the government continues in this fashion we will need a military operation in each province every six months," adding that young men with no prospects for marriage, employment, or education were easy recruits for Special Groups and foreign intelligence services.

Comment

¶ 9. (S/REL MCFI) Hashim's candor when discussing Iran was a refreshing change from contacts who, despite having relationships to Tehran, decry Iranian influence in all forms and present themselves as the sole U.S. ally in the south. Hashim seemed supportive of the PRT's desire to widen the scope of its engagements in Maysan, and the PRT plans to heed his advice and meet individually with the provincial bloc leaders before meeting the PC as a whole. The Maysani public likely apportions more blame to the provincial government for service delivery and development failures than Zaid is comfortable admitting. That said, the disparity between Maysan's oil resources and its current economic state, if properly channeled politically, could provoke calls for regions formation similar to those currently heard in Basrah. The sophistication of the August 19 attack supports Zaid's

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contention that it was the work of Special Groups, and he is right in identifying the causal link between unemployment and violence. However, the extent to which he and other Sadrists officials retain links to militants, Iranian-backed or otherwise, remains a troubling and unanswered question. End Comment.

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